

Letter from Christian Pineau to Jean Chauvel on the nationalisation of the Suez Canal (Paris, 27 July 1956)

Caption: On 27 July 1956, Christian Pineau, French Foreign Minister, informs Jean Chauvel, French Ambassador to London, of the decisions taken by France following the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company.

Source: Ministère des Affaires étrangères ; Commission de publication des DDF (sous la dir.). Documents diplomatiques français. Volume II: 1956, 1er juillet-23 octobre. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1990. 697 p. p. 167-168.

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T. Nos S 7479 to 7483.

Paris, 27 July 1956, 12:45 p.m.

Top priority. Restricted.

Your reference No 3006

1. The following decisions have now been taken:

a. Apart from the declaration agreed with London, the Finance Minister will be publishing a communiqué announcing a number of protective measures to safeguard the interests of the shareholders of the Company;

b. The Government is willing to approve the new order for *Mystère* aircraft submitted by Israel. In that connection, the Government would like to call an emergency meeting of the NEACC in Washington (see separate telegram).

c. A Cabinet meeting will be held at noon to study the situation and the steps necessary to guarantee the protection of French citizens and freedom of navigation.

d. This morning I shall be receiving the Egyptian Ambassador in order to lodge an initial protest; in addition, the Company is publishing a statement reminding its staff members that they are exclusively bound by contract to the Company. The Company wants to know whether the assets in sterling belonging to the Egyptian Government that have been frozen in London could be used as security for fair compensation to offset losses suffered by the Company and its shareholders. I should like to know the views of the British authorities on this point.

2. I agree that a three-way meeting should be held as soon as possible. My visit to London might provide a suitable occasion if Mr Dulles can be reached and is able to join us.

3. I agree that the governments interested in passage through the Canal should be approached, in particular those that signed the 1888 Convention. Consultations could be organised and, for the sake of convenience, held in London, between the diplomatic representatives of those governments.

4. On the subject of possible military action, I should like to be informed of the position that the British Cabinet will take on this matter. I shall inform you as soon as possible about the means at our disposal. I see that the 1888 Convention permits the presence of two naval vessels from each signatory country to be stationed at Port Said and Suez.

5. If unfortunate incidents were to occur, as the nationalisation decree seems to insinuate, and prison terms were imposed on Company staff members, all necessary measures to protect our citizens would have to be taken.

6. I believe that unyielding solidarity among the directly interested powers is indispensable if we are to achieve effective and energetic action.

I should like to point out the following:

a. France is in particular danger, firstly because of its considerable interests in the Company and secondly because of the threats that Colonel Nasser has expressed regarding Algeria.

b. We are dealing with two interconnected problems, the first being the expropriation of the Company and the second unimpeded passage through the Canal.

c. The Egyptian dictator is staging a trial of strength, which, if he wins, could have incalculable consequences, in particular for the entire Near East and the oil business.